

I have always been used to read Lucan's description of the effects of the bite of the little serpent, called *Seps*, as fabulous, or at least greatly exaggerated; and the rather, because, as far as I know, such an account is to be found in no other author. But I have now been an eye-witness to almost the whole scene of horror, so finely painted in the following lines:

———— *Plagæ proxima circum*  
*Fugit rapta cutis, pallentiaque ossa retextit:*  
*Membra natant sanie: suræ fluxere: sine ullo*  
*Tegmine poples erat: femorum quoque musculus omnis*  
*Liquitur, et nigrâ distillant inguina tæbe.*

LUCAN. *Pharsal.* Lib. ix. vers. 767.

Wattisham,  
 April 21, 1762.

LXXXV. *Extract of a second Letter from  
 the Rev. Mr. Bones, to Dr. Baker.*

Read May 6, 1762. **I** Have taken all the pains I can to inform myself of every circumstance, which may be deemed a probable cause of the disease, by which the poor family in my parish has been afflicted. But, I fear, I have discovered nothing, that will be satisfactory to you.

The following is an answer to your queries.

Water.] This they have taken out of a ditch, or pool of standing-water, at their own door (as is common in this clay country.) We have no spring, or well, in the parish.

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Beer.]

Beer.] They have generally bought their beer at a public-house. But, in August last, the poor man brewed two bushels of malt, in a large brass kettle, which is very commonly let out to the poor. It is an old one, but belongs to a cleanly housewife.

Bread.] We have no rye. This family have been used to buy two bushels of *clog-wheat*, or *rivets*, or *bearded-wheat*, (as it is variously called in this county) every fortnight. Of this they have made their household bread. This wheat they have bought of the farmer, whom I lodge with, who tells me, that last year he had some wheat *laid*, which he gathered, and threshed separately, lest it should spoil his *samples*. Not that it was mildewed, or grown, but only discoloured, and smaller than the other. This damaged wheat he threshed last Christmas; and then this poor family used no bread, but what was made of it, as likewise did the farmer's own family, and some others in the neighbourhood. We observed, that it made bad bread, and worse puddings; but I do not find, that it disagreed with any body. A labouring man of the parish, who had used this bread, was affected with a numbness in both his hands, for about four weeks from the ninth of January. His hands were continually cold, and his fingers ends peeled. One thumb, he says, still remains without any sensation.

Kitchen utensils.] They have two small iron pots, which have long been in use. In these they boiled their pork, pease, &c. They have likewise two *brass skillets*, rather old, in which they boiled milk, &c. The man tells me, they are in constant use, and never were *cankered*.

Pease.]

Pease.] They have now and then eaten pease and pease-broth. These they have always bought, as others do, at the shop: and they have never disagreed with any of the family, except only on Sunday, January 10. Three of the children were then sick after eating them; but became easy after they had vomited.

Pork.] This, I find, they generally bought pickled, of the farmer, whom I lodge with. The farmer's family, and several others, have constantly eaten it.

In this part of the country, there is a great deal of *old ewe-mutton*, killed between the first of November and January, some of which is very poor, and rotten, and is usually sold at three halfpence, or perhaps one penny, a pound. In December last, this family lived for three weeks, at least, upon this mutton, of which they bought a quarter at a time, weighing seven or eight pounds, for one shilling.

The man is so prepossessed with notions of witchcraft, and is so obstinate in his opinion, that I cannot excite in him even a desire of attributing this disease to any other cause.

Since my last letter to you, Mary, (aged sixteen) who sat for fourteen weeks in a great chair, and for seven days without any feet, or flesh on her leg-bones, has consented to have the bones taken off. She is now in bed: the abscess is healing, and she seems likely to do well.

The father's fingers are almost healed. But he every day feels severe darting pains in many parts of his body.

The mother lies in bed, with her leg-bones bare, which she will not suffer to be taken off. Her hands  
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are still benumbed, but not black. Her fingers are contracted. The rest of the family seem to be recovering perfect health.

Wattisham,  
April 30, 1762.

There is, in *l'Histoire de l'Academie Royale des Sciences*, for the year 1710, a paper, the title of which is, *Sur le \* bled cornu appelle Ergot*. Here it is said, that M. Noël, surgeon of the Hôtel-Dieu at Orleans, had sent an account to a member of the academy, that, within about a year's time, he had received into the hospital more than fifty patients afflicted *d'une gangrene sèche, noire, et livide*, which began at the toes, and advanced more or less, being sometimes continued even to the thighs; and that he had only seen one patient, who had been first seized with it in the hand. He adds, that he observed, that this disease affected the men only; and that, in general, the females, except some very young girls, were quite free from it.

In the same paper is mentioned, as a fact well known to the academy, the case of a peasant, who lived near Blois. In this patient, a gangrene, at its first attack, destroyed all the toes of one foot, then those of the other, afterwards the remaining parts of both feet; then the flesh of both his legs, and that of his thighs, rotted off successively, and left nothing but bare bones.

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\* *Secale corniculatum nigrum*, mentioned as a poison by Hoffman.

The gentlemen of the academy were of opinion, that the disease (of which M. Noël had sent an account) was produced by bad nourishment, particularly by bread, in which there was a great quantity of *ergot* \*. This substance is described by M. Fagon, first physician to the King, and is said by him to be a kind of monster in vegetation, which a particular sort of rye, sown in March, is more apt to produce, than what is sown in the autumn, and which often abounds in moist cold countries, and in wet seasons. How far it is true, that this substance was really the cause of the French epidemical gangrene described, I cannot determine. On comparison, we find, that the present disease at Wattisham, and that recorded by the French academy, do agree extremely in their effects. However, it is now certain, that rye made no part of the nourishment of the poor family at Wattisham.

Although we undoubtedly excel the antients in the knowledge of poisons, yet a great deal of that subject still remains unknown to us. It will, therefore, be very difficult for us to discover, to what cause, or to what combination of causes, so uncommon a malady is to be attributed.

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\* This degenerated rye is called *ergot*, from its resemblance to a cock's spur.